

...that particularly severe religious freedom violations are increasingly perpetrated by non-state actors in failing or failed states?

One of the greatest emerging threats to freedom of religion or belief comes not from the actions of governments but from non-state actors. Non-state actors vary greatly and include individuals, mobs, vigilante groups, anti-government insurgents, militant organizations, and U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) and/or are members of the al-Qaeda terrorist network. They differ significantly in ideology, purpose, end goals, and level of international and domestic recognition, and generally are motivated by a violent religious ideology to impose their religious beliefs on local populations and harshly punish those who do not abide by their religious edicts.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, violent religious extremist groups operate in failed and poorly governed states to both impose their extremist ideologies on vulnerable populations and challenge central authorities. From 2008 to 2012, al-Shabaab, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization allied with al-Qaeda, controlled central and southern Somalia, a failed state for more than 20 years. A March 2012 coup d'état led to a breakdown of government in northern Mali, leaving it vulnerable to religious extremist groups operating in the region including: al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al-Din (Defenders of the Faith), and the Movement for the Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA). Both al-Shabaab and the three terrorist groups in Mali implemented hudood punishments on those accused of crimes or deviation from accepted behaviors, and desecrated historic Sufi shrines in their war against the Sufi interpretation of Islam. Boko Haram operates throughout northern Nigeria and has targeted churches, individual Christians, government institutions and leaders, and schools in what it states are efforts to "cleanse" Nigeria of "morally corrupt" influences and implement "pure" Shari'ah law to resolve the ills facing northern Nigerian Muslims.

Violence from non-state actors often also arises in countries where the government exhibits hostility towards particular religious communities, either religious minorities or dissenting members of the religious majority. When discriminatory government laws or policies signal that certain groups are disfavored, non-state actors feel empowered to carry out violent attacks with little fear of reprisal. This is the case in Pakistan where mobs attack those deemed in violation of the country's blasphemy laws. As they fight the Karzai government in Afghanistan, the Taliban continues to commit gross religious freedom violations. In 2012, the Taliban executed 11 women for their advocacy work; in August they beheaded 15 men and two women for dancing at a party and bombed a mosque in Nangahar province killing 19; and in October, a Taliban suicide bombing killed at least 42 at a mosque during Eid.

In countries where these organizations operate, central and local government authorities often lack the capacity to stop the groups and need international assistance. To date, governments largely have responded to these groups with military action, with little attention to addressing political, societal, or economic policies that drive conflict and allow such groups to gain a foothold in society. Ultimately, when violent non-state actors remain unchallenged, or are not successfully challenged, they pose not only a threat to human rights, but also to the stability of the government in the country and regional security.